



## **Words of welcome from Antigone Dalamaga, RREUSE President**

On behalf of all the members of the network I'd like to thank you all for joining us here in Charleroi.

We're here today where on the brink of the release of the EU's Circular economy package, the RREUSE network chose to hold its first international social economy conference dedicated to actors who are active in the fields of waste prevention, re-use and recycling, but that are also in the business of creating jobs, empowering people as well as supporting disadvantaged and marginalized groups.

Today we're taking a look at how far we've come in recent years, what we've already created and achieved and how we've already been taking part in our own local circular economies. The role we have now and the one we still have to play and how we can continue to explore new ways to go beyond it - to further strengthen our communities, entrench our resilience and expand on innovation.

Our members all provide a very valuable contribution to their local communities, I'd like to highlight some of the many shining examples of where we see different ways our members support their communities.

For example, In Ireland, the Rediscovery Centre is an umbrella organization of four social enterprises and it also acts as a creative space connecting people, ideas and resources. The Centre recently opened its flagship headquarters, designed to act as a 3D textbook demonstrating re-use and sustainability principles, with the EU LIFE WISER project in partnership with Dublin City Council. The refurbished building was an old boiler house that used to provide hot water to residents in a socially deprived area of North Dublin. Through creative re-use of this building, as part of the regeneration of the Ballymun area, the Rediscovery centre has not only invested in the local community but also retained a valuable part of the area's heritage.

In my own country, Greece, the work the social cooperative Klimax+ does in local communities by not only employing people from marginalized groups - be it those with mental health disorders, ex-convicts, recovering drug addicts and in Roma communities, but it also makes them part of the decision making process of the cooperative. Not only does this allow them to take a step forward in their own personal development but also it empowers them within their own communities. For example, the children of Roma members of the cooperative have much higher literacy and school attendance rates

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than other children of their community which makes them role models, contributes to their de-stigmatization and creates a multiplying factor for further school enrollment.

As well on the subject building Communities – literally and figuratively – we can look to Italy where after the 2012 earthquake of Ferrara and Crevalcore, our member La Cita Verde provided a new service in collecting and cleaning the debris from fallen houses and created a new branch of its waste management services by recycling materials from construction and demolition waste. This provided a new valuable much needed service and created jobs in a community devastated by natural disaster as well as contributing to Ferrara's quick recovery. The social cooperative then went on to create award winning innovative methods through their LoWaste program.

In regards to resilience, during times of financial crisis we've seen that social economy actors were proven to be more resilient than traditional market actors. In our case, this is not a result of people being more interested in second hand goods, but also because very often social cooperatives' traditional role was and is to set up and fill the gap of providing high quality goods to an increasing number of people faced with financial difficulties. Despite many of the challenges faced we managed in an overwhelming amount of cases - not only to maintain the number of jobs our social enterprises provide - but to also increase the number of jobs created.

Here in Belgium, in neighboring Flanders, where the success of the Komosie concept relies strongly on good cooperation and relationships with local governments and strong social policy, the Kringwinkels have become very strongly embedded in their local community. They provide a service to their locals and their community by bringing back into circulation over 32.000 tonnes of products, providing over 5.400 jobs and providing support in the integration of socially isolated people. Despite the many strong and valid arguments for the need for sufficient financial and other types of support for them to be able to realize their social projects - the Kringwinkels receive less and less subsidies and have had to act more and more as entrepreneurs - investing in new activities, as well as innovative business models and partnerships.

This brings me to my next point - innovation.

In the field of innovation, many of our members are looking not only at developing new ways to deal with old materials but also at new methods to render waste management more efficient. Here we have some shining examples such as Le Relais, a member of Emmaus, which developed Metisse to deal with old cotton clothing that could not be reused. Metisse is an insulation material that is produced from defibred cotton textiles and then industrially transformed into a high quality insulation material. It has high performing qualities both as a thermal and as an acoustic insulating material. It also

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manages to be a safer more environmentally friendly material than many insulation materials available on the market today. The production of Metisse has not only lead to finding a sustainable alternative for these textiles that would have otherwise been incinerated but it has also lead to creating more social jobs locally in France.

In Catalonia, the work integration enterprise Solidanca is working on a project with their local government and the university to trace the cycle of donated IT equipment using open source systems. Together, the community develops a software that makes donations of IT equipment easier and ensures transparency of its life cycle. This innovation helps to secure that instead of being prematurely scrapped, re-usable electric and electronic equipment is kept in function as long as possible and properly recycled at the end of its life.

Our Dutch members, bKN are also working on innovative methods of traceability, benchmarking and reporting. Their reporting software has been developed over 12 years and is now used by nearly 70 re-use centres of bKN. A strong emphasis is also put on its accessibility for employees with different level of skills. Thanks to the data collection, bKN can show the concrete impact they make on employment, CO2 emission savings and economy.

Last but not least, there are great initiatives in support of the development of social enterprises here in the city of Charleroi and the region of Wallonia, we'll see what Terre is doing locally in textiles and hear from Ressources and the Walloon Ministry of environment.

During this conference today and at the internal meetings and site visits tomorrow, you will get the chance to see many more of these great examples. I know this exchange of knowledge and best practice will help support all our work across Europe and help us contribute more to our local communities, develop more resilience and take strides in innovation.

I'd like to thank all our sponsors, especially Igretec and Eco-systèmes, EPA Ireland, AkzoNobel, IFixit Europe; local partners ICDI, Ressourcerie Val De Sambre, QUAI 10, CPAS de Charleroi as well as a special thanks to Ressources and Terre.